

Shamanic Landscaping: The New Ritual Garden
(An adventure in Magic Realism)
By Tony Heywood

This essay describes how I combined a primitive, meditative technique known as Shamanic Journeying with the contemporary digital imaging technology of computer gaming to explore new ways of re-presenting and engaging with nature. A process that took my horticulturally-driven artistic practice in a novel direction enabling me to use 'the garden' as an artistic medium to create a series of landscape portraits of the British Isles. These took the form of living abstract horticultural installations constructed within giant glass-fronted steel chambers.

The resulting 'living portraits' became hybrid landscapes - part sculpture, part garden, part horticultural installation - incorporating contemporary digital technology, animation, film and live performance to enhance and deliver landscape and nature as drama and spectacle albeit in a dystopic form. The realisation of the work incorporated Surrealist techniques and sensibilities to produce results that felt closely aligned to the school of 'Magic Realism'.

The essay will also address my search to develop a landscape form that is more relevant to our current fragmented urban condition; one that is increasingly digitally driven, with the term 'nature' taking on new multiple meanings.

Since the 1990s, my artistic practice has principally focused on new ways of representing nature and landscape. A process that began by using photography and paint to create 2D representations soon expanded in dimension and scale to involve the creation of complete, immersive 'micro-landscapes'. These 3D models were intended to evoke imaginary landscapes based on specific places that I had visited. Their creation involved taking natural material gathered from the site and incorporating it within the photographic frame. These very abstract works combined a huge range of living, dead and inert materials and were created in a studio then photographed in the dark using a torch. These ambiguous, partly illuminated, micro-worlds were an attempt to conjure up the spirit and mood of the place and to evoke a sense of the mysterious and the otherworldly. Viewers of the photographs would, I hoped, sense that the image was a landscape and much more than the sum of its botanical parts. I was attempting to conjure up that sensation of 'seeing' something beyond the work itself - a feeling akin to an intuitive exploration of the space; the audience would have a sense of my peripheral liminal perception rather than a concrete visualisation.

My installations then grew in scope until they took up entire gallery spaces. Needing to expand, I moved on to my first exterior works in public spaces. These external installations allowed me new possibilities for re-presenting nature to a public audience.

The search for a landscape form and language reflective of our cut and paste, digitally driven age that would be relevant to contemporary urban dwellers was challenging. We live in a time of superabundance, fast burn and the reign of the virtual. As a result, we are increasingly distanced from 'real' nature and likely to encounter it only as a digitally rendered, virtual form; as experienced within an augmented gaming simulation machine for example. This is a digitised version of nature, re-presented in exaggerated formats, image driven and highly airbrushed. For many urban dwellers, nature is now reduced to a 'sign', an object or commodity for consumption. In this way, nature can become a backdrop loaded with cultural references and used in areas such as advertising where it is re-presented back to us as a form of

film genre. This is a Disneyfication of landscape with nature as adventure, sport, mystery, drama or even science fiction; cut and spliced together for visual effect.

In order to respond to this new imaginary version of nature, I developed a landscape aesthetic that could reflect its essential 'denaturing' by incorporating artistic strategies closely associated with significant twentieth century movements. Movements not only dealing with concepts of perception but also, I felt having an affinity with nature and landscape study. These included Dadaism, Surrealism and Pop art.

One overriding technique uniting all these movements is the 'collage'. This cut and paste approach re-examined the relationship between painting and sculpture and, I felt, if applied to landscape could open up whole new possibilities which would, in the context of the horticultural installation, appear as extreme versions of the work of Kurt Schwitters or Robert Rauschenberg's 'combines'. The resulting 'living assemblages' were to be composed of mixed media with the site literally becoming the canvas for a new expressive landscape grammar in which nature is transformed into a hybrid landscape to be interpreted by the public through the de-coding of a system of 'signifiers' within the installation. Unlike most urban landscape designs, my semiotic, proto-symbolic driven installations formed extreme collagic versions of landscape art that could perhaps be deconstructed in exactly the same way as music or drama; as fully fledged signifying systems made up of a textual landscape.

Much contemporary large-scale urban landscape design has been dominated by ecological considerations. I wanted to break out of this constrictive paradigm and find new ways to 'think' about nature and landscape. Magic, alchemy and romance seem to have been routinely usurped by more ecologically driven meta-narratives of the 'landscape urbanism' movement; I sought to use my hybrid installations to effect a re-enchantment of urban landscape design. Since the basis of my practice has always been driven by a desire to draw from a 'real' or raw nature, I came to the conclusion that the way to express my alternative feelings about nature was by using nature to talk about itself.

My earlier conceptual landscape installations could be seen as cool, distanced and detached, but what they perhaps lacked was enchantment. These de-natured, technologically driven hybrid landscapes involved LED screens, projections and soundscapes. They formally represented, and directly engaged with our current de-natured urban lifestyles. Yet whilst my earlier installations celebrated this dis-enchanted state, I have now come to believe in the need to invest my work with new layers of meaning which might, perhaps, lend them a more magical and spiritual dimension capable of re-enchanting. I wanted to offer the viewer a more connected and deeper emotional experience of the landscapes; one that would also require them to become physically involved with the installation. To this end, I began to develop the idea of the 'New Ritual Garden'.

I would now like to introduce my very personal approach to creating these horticultural installations; it includes a foray into shamanic journeying as an example of how more extreme psychological and theatrical 'tools' of engagement with nature opened up new sources of inspiration; which enabled me to find a new expressive landscape vocabulary to create what I have called the 'Magic Realist' landscape.

Incorporating these landscapes within the larger urban fabric could create a 'contemporary urban picturesque'. These new installations could mediate between the overpowering architecture, 'the sublime' and the delicate soft vegetation-dominated plantings of the urban

sidewalk 'the beautiful'. In this context, the installations become urban follies, creating markers and reference points within the cityscape and bringing a sense of local identity to our urban heterotopias. Their abstract and collagic forms would be encoded with signifiers relating to a range of contemporary local issues and use nature as a device driving the landscape language of the installation. The demand for such individual landscapes within urban spaces becomes even more important in a global market where all modern cities compete to participate in the glass skyscraper aesthetic.

Some practitioners and landscape critics might view my landscape installations as dystopic and mutant; a hybrid form belonging within the formal confines of a gallery. I see my vision as a healthy source of new ideas - it is neither a solely negative dystopia nor an exclusively positive utopia, rather a mixture of both - offering sources of pleasure and new imaginings of the world.

It is an approach to landscape planning for urban dwellers that does not always look backwards towards either heritage or traditional romantic articulations of the meaning of nature.

In our traditional vision of utopian landscaping, we picture green oases; commonly perceived as 'places of retreat' from reality. This 'reassurance' through passive tranquility is itself backward looking; reflecting a version of romance drawn from historical models. These are a fecund source of inspiration but can surely be reworked and made contemporary. Their core values represent a time that was limited by the known and the rational. We no longer need to be constrained by such limits. We need our cities to be re-enchanted.

The call for secular spaces of contemplation in our cities led by the popular philosopher, Alain de Botton, is, I hope, not merely a cry for more verdant garden squares. In my opinion, his demand opens up a new debate about the form that 'contemplation' might take, particularly in an urban context.

My new horticultural installations aim to arouse and entrance in much the same way as cinematic immersion. Instead of encouraging a passive, soothing emotional encounter, I want to encourage what I have described as a more 'active' form of contemplation. To achieve this I want to develop a landscape form that will allow viewers to transcend the urban everyday and enter into a magic realm of the inner self where the unconscious mind is stirred by new representations of nature. This is the basis for the abstract, collagic landscapes of 'Magic Realism' that I believe will encourage the imagination to run riot. The audience, however, must have a firm base from which to run.

The inclusion of living plant material and other botanical signifiers provides a reality check and a 'natural' springboard from which the more fantastical and fabulous 'otherworldly' elements within these installations may 'work their magic' - via an evocation of the uncanny. Other magic realism tropes and surrealist practices require an element of the real, the aesthetically credible, to provide a position of normality from which the fantastic can spring. When natural vegetative elements, such as the sky and the wind, interact visually with the inert found objects and symbolic forms - of which these installations are composed - a form of alchemy takes place with nature, in this context, providing an 'external' counter to the illogical and irrational. This process of 'suspension of disbelief' is, in point of fact, how the viewer transcends the everyday. The viewer needs to be caught between the two levels of reality for these magic realist landscapes to work effectively on the imagination.

The landscape portraits, which I have called 'Glamourlands', were an attempt to capture the essence and 'spirit' of places that I had visited. I wanted the viewer to experience both aspects of the work; the realistic elements (living vegetation, rocks, water and formal topographic features) as well as the more surreal and symbolic abstract elements. With all these elements combined within the assemblage, the complete 'horticultural installation' would be an attempt to invoke 'the spirit of place'; a more fully engaging and complete artistic expression of the landscape I was trying to portray.

I also felt the need to realise a more truthful method of engaging with the natural landscapes I had visited. This, I felt, could not be achieved through traditional artistic means of recording nature i.e. photography and sketching, leading to mere 'mimetic' representations. I was seeking a more intuitive approach through unlocking 'unconscious' ways of seeing and feeling. I needed a method of engaging with nature that would operate on a deeper psychological level.

My academic background in Anthropology had introduced me to shamanic practices that focus on accessing nature's 'inner spirit'. No matter how much one reads about revelatory, mystical experiences, literature will never come close to actually 'experiencing' the meaning phenomenologically. As a rational, modernist artist, this notion naturally presented multiple challenges. Shamanic journeying offered a psychological technique that was based not on religion, dogma or written text but on a secular, personalised spiritual activity akin to meditation or self-induced trance.

I had previously experimented with 'self-styled' methods of dis-engaging and immersing myself in nature. One of these involved dressing in costumes made from materials at the site. I would cocoon, masquerade and shield myself from reality. It was a way of re-sensing the world afresh. My costume provided a new inner world from which I could grow and emerge from the encounter anew. Sensing the place perhaps as an animal, more instinctively, the camouflage allowed me to disappear and meld into the vegetation; to become part of the scene.

I decided to explore this 'visionary' approach with the help of a shamanic teacher who used rhythm and pulse to induce a sense of trance or 'alternative shamanic consciousness'. The intention was to alter my state of consciousness when I visited one of my locations. Physically, the technique involved hypnotic drum beating and rhythmic breathing to achieve a hypnagogic state of awareness. A shamanic journey involves entering into a dream-like state where one experiences extreme visual images within the mind. To begin the journey, one focuses on an imaginary opening - a hole in the ground - and then imagines a descent into a 'lower world'. At a certain point, when the mind becomes willing to accept the internal imagery, a sudden shift takes place. This new mental state is clearly not conscious but consists of an arrival at a new state of awareness in which you feel that you are not in control but, somehow, being led. Ego and conscious self are no longer the driving force; you have entered into another cosmos, a world that traditional shamanic practitioners would call the world of the spirit, encountering strange lands and animals.

As in hypnosis, one is still aware of 'real' nature. It is a hybrid way of knowing. Western psychologists have dismissed Shamans as schizophrenic hysterics and tend to see the psyche as 'inside' the body with the 'real' inside, governing the external. While Derrida would term this binary metaphysics logocentrism, with the inner being prioritised over the outer, Jung would say that the Shamanic consciousness works outside the body in a more primitive notion of the psyche. In my experience, such a duality is possible and the visions encountered on a shamanic journey are, arguably, experienced as real events; perhaps, even more intensely real than

'normal' reality, they can inform our consciousness when we return. For me, this is a form of magic in the old traditional sense. I went on to use this new found source of knowledge to create my horticultural installations.

These spiritual journeys provided me with a new source of knowledge, a new epistemological base - a shamanic source of knowledge - not based on empirical fact or biology but on a psychological encounter with the 'spirit of nature'. It is an alternative way of re-presenting the natural. The new installations were the result of my interpretation of this modified form of consciousness, which allowed me to re-enchant my artwork and find new value in it. A value not bound by academic theory or philosophy but by a deeper sense of connectedness to the place itself; one derived from a very real and close alternate encounter with it.

This is an extreme method of engaging with nature but I felt I had found a psychological tool that gave me an opportunity to engage with the place's essence or soul; an existentially driven approach that seemed to be closer in thinking to phenomenology than empiricism. The challenge now was to re-present and deliver the shamanic experience as an artwork using the medium of landscape and hope that the public would sense something of the spirit and psyche of place through their own emotional interaction with my installations.

In order to provide a more concrete platform - a base from which an artistic expression of this kind could be presented to a public audience - in each of my chosen locations, I carried out a series of more scientifically based field studies, with the aim of providing a sound horticultural, geological and environmental aspect to the artwork. To achieve this, I undertook detailed field studies of all flora, rocks and inert materials found on the site. I also recorded a series of short films of my time spent at each location that captured, almost randomly, various key elements that attracted my attention or related to my shamanic journey. This provided the basis for 'triggers' of memory, which I played back in the studio in order to re-conjure the shamanic aspect of my experience at the site.

In the studio, I built a life-size replica of the steel chamber in which I would present my now highly cartoon-like 'magic realist' landscape; lining its floors and walls with paper. In an attempt to re-engage with the memory of the site, I wore a computer simulation helmet. This device replayed the film footage that I had made on location on the inner visor of the helmet. During the replay I simultaneously drew on the paper using charcoal; an 'automatic' graphic response to the collage-like film that I was watching.

The complex sinuous lines on the paper - the 'automatic' drawings - provided the basic graphic outline form from which I carved a full-scale landmass from high-density expanded foam. Each hand-carved section was then blasted with materials relevant to the specific location - bronze and copper for Tintagel, Cornwall; anthracite for the Jurassic coast. These forms were then placed inside the steel chamber as 'basic landforms' and the installations planted up with the specific species of native flora that I had recorded on the field study, allowing the highly cartoon like artificial landforms to be gradually colonised by these species. The carved landforms were subsequently hand inlaid with thousands of multi-faceted jewels to provide an even more intense otherworldly viewing experience.

The intention behind the work was to create a 'hybrid landscape'; a new nature combining primitive meditative techniques with cutting edge digital technology. I was hoping to create a new techno-primitive, hybrid landscape that, in its mongrel nature, would capture the

multiplicity of sensations I had invested in it. A Glamourland - part fantasy, part reality - would be the result.

My hope was that the audience would experience the 'alternative sense of place' that I had attempted to capture in the work; viewing these Glamourland installations inside steel boxes presented a televisual experience, one distanced through glass and viewed from a single perspective. Taking this further, in my search for a way to re-connect with the individual viewer, I began to formulate artistic solutions that would require more physical participation and direct interaction with the installation. Opening new avenues of exploration in which conceptually driven landscapes were not primarily experienced through intellectual engagement but rather through experiential activity. The magic realist landscape could become even more potent in a new guise I refer to as 'The New Ritual Garden'.

My recent adaptations of these 'Glamourland' portraits called for a new form of engagement, one that allowed viewers to become reconnected not only with the artwork, but also with themselves. The New Ritual Garden can offer this form of phenomenological engagement; an emotional state that is absent in most conceptual and theoretical practices today. At its heart lies the simple notion of 'personal embodiment' within a space using a process of co-creation achieved through ritualistic activity. The New Ritual Garden offers a way, not just of 'seeing' but also of experiencing and sensing the 'Glamourlands' so enabling individuals to find more personal meaning in the work as they enter and encounter these new magic spaces through ritual activity.

The steel chamber in which the engagement takes place encloses and physically separates the individual from the outside world becoming architecturally a micro 'Hortus-conclusus' - a kind of theatre in the round. Each individual becomes their own private custodian of the Glamourland where they can act out a series of prescribed actions such as chanting, lighting fires or the endless rolling of a rock for example. Such acts facilitate a diminution of thought and give rise to a form of contemplation that leads to a sense of detachment from the everyday. This, in turn, leads to a process of self-mastery.

Nature here is the key tool. While wilderness has, traditionally, provided a location for self-discovery, these new Glamourlands offer up a hybrid urban wilderness and employ innovative technologies alongside contemporary materials in unsettling combinations, to create a sense of the unfamiliar.

This is not a 'religious' experience nor is it connected to any specific liturgy or concept of the 'Netherworld'. It is more akin to a therapeutic ceremony; the acting out of a counter-ritual, which has more in common with monastic or Zen Buddhist rituals than traditional dogma. The New Ritual Garden, in essence, is a space in which a single determined activity leads to personal identification with and, ultimately, a deeper understanding of, the space in which the ritual is carried out. In this respect the physical space becomes an 'embodied place'.

The Ritual Garden requires each viewer to re-visit the space a number of times in order to carry out a series of highly focused actions. Ultimately, the participant will arrive at a level of psychological engagement that could be called reconnectedness; a form of the restorative experience for which most landscape designers strive. What is different about these ritual landscapes is that they require active engagement, from those who wish to involve themselves, in what may be described as irrational, compulsive behaviour. Individuals are able to use the site to act out and evolve their own intimate and personal space in a process akin to a

therapeutic ceremony. This is an art of place-making achieved through an understanding and deployment of architectonic processes combined with ritual theatrics.

Most importantly, the New Ritual Garden offers a sensuous level of interaction that uses landscape in a very different way to most other gardens. My vision is another version of nature. I do not seek to find respite from the oppressive urban condition but, rather, a sense of knowing and being that was once only available to those who spent time in the Wilderness in a search to find their true selves. In this way 'nature' is once more returned to us, albeit in a highly artificial state, as a source of magic.

To further explore the ritualistic aspect of my work I have begun to incorporate live 'ritual performances' within my landscapes. The performer, wearing a costume created out of the same materials that make up the landscape, emerges, chameleon-like, from within the chamber to re-enact a series of loosely prescribed rituals within the Glamourland landscape. These performances, partly choreographed and partly spontaneous, are a response to the animated screens and soundscapes that are integral to delivering a level of narrative to the work. They have subsequently been filmed. The films were then subject to a total re-edit and spliced with new digitally manipulated imagery to tease out and develop further the narrative element of the work. The result could then be shown in a gallery context as a series of short films.

On reflection, it now seems as if I have gone full circle; reducing nature, once again, to a two dimensional moving image that quirkily resembles my very first still life photographs of some 30 years ago.